

Robert F. Barsky, "Crossing Borders from France to Japan - and America", *AmeriQuests* 13.1 (2017)

## Avant-propos

One of the many joys of my role as Faculty Director of the W. T. Bandy Center at Vanderbilt University has been to meet with an array of remarkable colleagues, authors and writers who have been committed to exploring the work of Charles Baudelaire, and the work of French modern writers, from the many perspectives that this corpus offers. My own interest as a faculty member in Nashville Tennessee, a place that Baudelaire may very well have liked but most certainly never thought of in his rich and varied existence, is how his work would be received in the many settings in which he is read, discussed, and interpreted. One such colleague Jean-Paul Avice, Jean-Paul Avice, bibliothécaire-adjoint, responsable du fonds Apollinaire et d'expositions littéraires at la Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris. Avice's considerable talents, including his ability to recite from memory the entire corpus of Baudelaire's poetry, have been brought to bear upon our Bandy Center through his association as co-author with Claude Pichois, with whom he wrote *Baudelaire/Paris* (Quai-Voltaire/Paris-Musées 1993). Avice is also the author of le *Dictionnaire Baudelaire* (Du Lérot, 2002), *Baudelaire, l'Ivresse des images* (Textuel, 2003), *Les Dessins de Baudelaire* (Textuel, 2003) and *Baudelaire, Paris sans fin* (Paris-Musées/Paris-bibliothèques, 2004). We hosted him here, as part of our invited speakers lecture series in the Bandy Center, and not only did he enthral the community, he himself was enthralled, perhaps even shocked, by the sophistication, the beauty and the passion of Vanderbilt's Bandy Center, and those attracted to its hallowed spaces. He was also taken by surprise by the beauty and the vivacity of Middle Tennessee, a place that he, like his poetic mentor, hadn't considered as a place of sophisticated French culture! I discussed with him the idea of hosting a series of lectures and conferences on the reception of Baudelaire, and through his aid, I contacted a host of French scholars in Tokyo, with whom I met up in 2014, in order to plan an eventual conference. The result of these discussions, and a most memorable trip to Japan, was the conference we held in 2015, and this, the papers that emerged from it. The richness and intensity of this issue provide ample grounds for continuing this work, and serious scholarship to guide others who wish to follow this scholarly pathway.

## Challenging Boundaries in Life and in Art

This issue is being published at a dark time in America, when the breaking down of borders, of the type that led to the introduction of Baudelaire to the Japanese, is being challenged. Matthew Perry, who commanded the U.S. Navy's East India Squadron to establish diplomatic relations with Japan, delivered President Fillmore's request for a treaty to a representative of the Japanese emperor in July of 1853. He then returned with a larger force in 1854, and obtained the signature of Japanese authorities on the Treaty of Kanagawa. This was a treaty of so-called permanent friendship, eventually contributing to significant commercial trade between Japan and the West, the modernization of the Japanese state, and a shift in what we know as modernism in the West. The first exchanges were between Perry and the Shogun, the chief of Japan's military government, as well as some of his councilors, and reception commissioners. The choice of these gifts may say something about what America thought of itself, and about what the Japanese government thought Americans like to receive. From the Americans, among a rather large stash of armaments, were: 1 box of books, 1 box of perfumery, 1 barrel of whiskey, 1 cask of wine, 11 pistols for distribution, a quantity of cherry cordials for distribution, a number of baskets of champagne, 1 box of chinaware, a quantity of maraschinos, 1 telescope for the Emperor, several Boxes of tea for the Emperor, 4 volumes of the Audubon Birds of America, several clocks, 10 ship's beakers containing 100 gallons of whiskey and 8 baskets Irish potatoes.

The Americans received what Perry called "first items", including 5 pieces of brocade, 40 bamboo fans, 50 tobacco pipes, and 50 lacquered cups, fabrics, over a thousand eggs, all sorts of lacquer ware, sake, and fans. It was a collection of gifts that Perry and his officers later described as "mediocre and disappointing." And Lt. George Preble commented the assembled presents formed a "pretty display," but were

of not much value. Indeed, I am sure one of our presents of Audubon's Great Work on American birds was worth more than all we saw there, and our miniature railroad engine and car cost several times their value. It is to be regretted they do not include some of the

rich brocades for which Japan is famed or any of their beautiful copper castings, or inlaid work of gold or silver... something also that would illustrate the daily life and habits of a people excluded from the rest of the world so many years. The supposition of their magnificence and immense wealth, will I think prove a mistake. And the splendor of their court exists only in the romances of the old travellers and Jesuits.

It was perhaps this disappointment, in addition to the mandate to collect samples of Japanese goods marketable in America, that led Perry and others from the expedition to purchase other items at the Shimoda, Hakodate, and Naha bazaars. A Japanese shopkeeper recorded in his diary that

Commodore Perry made purchases including a fine lacquered box in tiers, a lacquered medicine case, a brocade, and other things. Other American officers bought items such as lacquer ware, silks, chinaware, ink, ink stones, children's parasols, tobacco pouches, wooden temple gongs, flower vases, wooden containers, chests of drawers, children's drums, and personal seals.

Perry also acquired "items of Japanese art" and an illustrated book for children, and his reaction to the art work was very favorable. Lt. Preble reported as well that "among the informal presents received by Commodore Perry was a box of obscene paintings of naked men and women," but they are not catalogued in the surviving Smithsonian Institute collection of gifts. We do have Perry's diaries, though, that include his sense that Japanese artists were very advanced, demonstrating a knowledge of perspective, and that they produced their works with unusual rapidity and dexterity. He also remarked that he was very taken by the subdued coloring of Japanese artworks, and the artist's realistic adherence to nature. Perry even witnessed first-hand an artist at work at Hakodate, painting a set of folding screens for which he'd received a commission.

### **From Exchange to Sanctuary**

Thinking about these first exchanges of gifts brings us to consider why this particular selection of goods, from amongst the wide array of artifacts from an era in Japan deemed "preindustrial," were chosen as representative of Japanese culture. And choices made by Americans perhaps provide some sense of what President Fillmore and his advisors deemed important, and representative, in America's era of rising global influence and international trade. Historical cross-cultural contact, between Japan and the West, and, in return, between the West and Japan. In this issue, we expand our understanding of these exchanges, and consider the introduction of French modernism to a reluctant space, far from the shores of France, or the US. And to put this issue into the current context, we can also consider the effects of building new walls, new restrictions, and new barriers to exchanges of all sorts, while also contemplating the "sanctuary" that can be offered in order to maintain our obligations, and to promote dignity and understanding, rather than criminalization and violence.

### **"America"**

Amidst it all, we have much to be sad about, much to regret, and, as a host of administrations throw xenophobic, racist, sexist and classist fuel upon populist fires, we especially have a lot to fear. I am fortunate to be teaching a course in this tumultuous time in American history with the inimitable David Maraniss, and the breadth and depth of his knowledge, honed and finely tuned with his profound humanism, have been a great solace and inspiration to me, and to our students. Some evidence, if evidence be required, is to be found in the Allen Ginsberg inspired "America" poems that they have written, poetry that finds beat inspiration and then catapults it into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In their honor, and in the name of hope for our future, we offer them to you here, in a special poetry section devoted to America.